Interpretation
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Carl Schmitt's Quest for the Political:
Theology, Decisionism, and the Concept of the Enemy

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Carl Schmitt was the most influential German political theorist after World War I and for a time (1933–36) a leading jurist in the Nazi regime. Until recently Schmitt's work has been largely ignored outside of Germany because of his association with Nazism. His work, particularly *The Concept of the Political*, is again in vogue, however—and among leftists no less—especially since his death in 1985 (see *Telos* 72 [Summer 1987]).

Perhaps the end of the Cold War and the recent transformation of Central and Eastern Europe have given Schmitt's teachings a new lease on life.

Schmitt's influence depended on his penetrating insights into the transformation of the European state system as a result of World War I. Have not recent events shown that the problems that emerged in 1918 were never resolved? The nuclear stalemate and the bipolar superpower system of the United States of America and the Soviet Union, the *unique* situation resulting from the aftermath of World War II, merely concealed the perennial political conflicts which remained the concern of Schmitt until his death. Consider the failure of world communism, the collapse of the Soviet empire and the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself, the resulting revival of nationalism, the re-emergence of ethnic strife in the Balkans, and the reunification of Germany. Perhaps the unique issues of the recent past and the present are best understood from some broader perspective than that of the world after 1945. The chief question would be, Does Schmitt's "concept of the political" supply the basis for such a perspective? Does not the full comprehension of the concrete political situation require in the end the conceptual framework of philosophy rather than the dogmas of ideology?

Schmitt found wanting the formalistic, legalistic study of politics common in the German academy at the time. Hans Kelsen reduced politics to legal norms— what was termed "the pure theory of law."

As a result, Schmitt came under the influence of political sociology, such as the studies of Max Weber, who defined the state as the institution possessing the monopoly of the use of force. For Schmitt the person who represents the sovereign power of the state alone decides the state of emergency, the exceptional or extreme situation. Such a decision unfettered by legal niceties determines the essence of sovereignty.[1]

Schmitt's realism had a strong influence on the study of international affairs (for example, the work of Hans Morgenthau). But one may ask if it is possible to combine Schmitt's realism in foreign policy with Kelsen's liberal legalism in domestic policy. Such was the position of those who considered themselves pragmatic liberals. What if society is on the verge of civil war or revolution, however? Under these circumstances legal norms do not suffice to preserve the state. Schmitt's conception of sovereignty applies to both domestic and foreign policy.

A combination of a pragmatic liberalism in domestic politics and a moderate realism in foreign affairs may be the reasonable policy. But what is the *political principle* which may direct this dual policy? According to classical liberalism, *the right to self-preservation* is both the source of individual freedom and the sanction of political power. Schmitt did not consider the principle of classical liberalism as an adequate basis of his conception of the state, however. He praised the founder of liberalism, Hobbes, with whom he shared the conception of absolute sovereignty. But the motivation of Schmitt's theory was quite different from Hobbes's. Schmitt presented himself as the implacable foe of liberalism—of individualism.

Schmitt's opposition to liberalism was rooted in his adaptation of Catholic theology to the analysis of the development of the nation-state system. Although of traditional Catholic upbringing, Schmitt did not view the state solely from the perspective of the teachings of the Church. In his *Political Theology* Schmitt developed what one may term a sociological conception of Catholic theology. He maintained that the concepts of the theory of the modern state are in fact secularized theological concepts.

By adaptation of theistic theology, the omnipotent sovereign is analogous to the omnipotent God. Likewise, the exception, the political decision outside the ordinary limits of the law, is analogous to the miracle. But the philosophers of the Enlightenment were deists who rationalized theology so that God, as merely the first cause, was understood basically as ruling the cosmic order at a distance in terms of fundamental regularities or scientific principles. They ruled out miracles and generally God's personal intervention. By analogy in the political-social sphere, the monarch had to govern according to natural law and the principles of the constitution, which seemed to eliminate the decision as to the exception. But in politics the need for the concrete decision independent of the generality of the law arises from time to time. Accordingly, Schmitt considered Hobbes as "the classical representative" of *decisionism* (*Political Theology*, p. 33) because he argued, despite his modern rationalism, that the decisionist character of sovereignty is intrinsically connected to personal authority. Schmitt thus suggested that *theistic*, rather than *deistic*, theology offered the greater insight into politics. Like God according to monotheism, so the sovereign according to decisionism creates out of nothing. Schmitt claimed that his methodology offers the basis for a sociology of concepts that will explain the

character of the state in a certain epoch. The structure of theological and metaphysical concepts corresponds to the structure of political concepts (p. 45).

Schmitt found inspiration in the reactionary Catholic thinkers who mounted an attack on modern rationalism and in particular the doctrines and consequences of the French Revolution (p. 53).

In the nineteenth century these thinkers (e.g., de Maistre and Donoso Cortes) revived theism as the basis for restoring sovereignty, a decisionist monarchy. By contrast the conceptual world had become bereft of even the abstract deistic God—liberalism, anarchism, and socialism laid the foundation for the total rejection of any legitimate form of sovereign rule because no authority transcended civil society. All governing principles were now immanent—metaphysical and political. In order to supply the condition for the *decisionist* element of government, it would be necessary to resort to dictatorship because the legal system (at least in the West) no longer recognized the exception. The theological counterpart to divided or pluralistic authority is polytheism.

The counterrevolutionary Catholic thinkers rejected the rationalistic, Aristotelian elements of Thomistic theology and the doctrine of natural law. The order of society depends on the *personal* authority of the monarch, as the order of the family depends on the personal authority of the father. The form of personalism is grounded on the supreme will of God. The infallibility of the pope has its counterpart in the sovereignty of the king. In both Church and State there is the final, infallible decision—the *moral* decision. As Schmitt formulated it near the end of *Political Theology*, "the core of the political idea [is] the exacting moral decision" (p. 65). The decision as to the exception is thus not simply a matter of power but of morality, of determining the just and the unjust. The moral responsibility of each member of society depends on the principle of sovereignty.

For Schmitt every political idea is derived from a basic presupposition as to the nature of man (p. 56). The theological tradition maintained that man is corrupted by original sin, although capable of redemption through faith and by the grace of God. *Political* theology must focus on man's depravity and disregard man's capacity for moral choice. Human evil necessitates sovereign authority. The sovereign decision that distinguished the just from the unjust is thus conditioned by original sin. The sovereign authority has only the capacity to contain human wickedness, not to establish goodness. Modern political doctrines, e.g., liberalism, democracy, and socialism, claim that man is good and thus oppose as such a juridical sovereign authority. Theological-metaphysical principles are linked to politics by way of anthropology, or the presupposition as to human nature. Schmitt suggested that the very idea of politics as such is rooted in man's evilness. The doctrine of man's inherent goodness is essentially unpolitical and therefore antithetical to the justification of the state.

Notwithstanding Schmitt's agreement with certain features of reactionary Catholic thought, he accepted only the *formal* structure of theology as the

framework for a sociology of the state. In part, he emptied theological concepts of religious and moral content. For example, while Schmitt apparently retained an indefinite concept of divine providence, it is not clear how divine right as the ultimate directive of political right is a central factor in his theory.[7]

Schmitt's formalistic and, to an extent, positivistic conception of politics clearly emerges in his most influential work, *The Concept of the Political*.[3] Rather than being the exacting moral decision the core of the political idea was transmuted into the antithesis between friend and enemy. The question necessarily arises, Is Schmitt's decisionism sufficient to encompass the complexity of politics? Did he offer the real alternative to the narrowness of the legal normativism that he rejected?

Because of Schmitt's association with the Nazi regime, it is usual to conclude that *The Concept of the Political* exhibits theoretical support for extremist, rightist views that form the basis for Nazi ideology. While perhaps it is warranted to consider the possible ideological consequences of Schmitt's teaching, in discussing a theorist of Schmitt's stature I think it is essential to distinguish the polemical and theoretical strands of the argument. As expected, the error of most liberal and leftist critics is precisely to confuse theory and ideology. Because of the failure of Marxism and the insufficiencies of the Frankfort School, however, some leftist theorists are increasingly turning to Schmitt for political insight (see *Telos* 72 [Summer 1987]).

In a sense *The Concept of the Political* offers a broader view of politics than the earlier work, *Political Theology*. While the latter developed a narrow but substantive conception of political decisionism and sovereignty, the former developed a more encompassing conception of politics but somewhat devoid of content. As Schmitt moved from his preoccupation with the theological basis of the sovereignty of the state to a general concept of politics, he came increasingly under the influence of political sociology and as a result abstracted from the moral content of politics.

Schmitt concluded that the state presupposes the political. The state must be defined in terms of politics, rather than the reverse. The political is the sphere of human life which includes the state that most expresses the nature of politics. For Schmitt each sphere of human thought and experience must be understood in terms of a specific distinction. The criterion of morality is the antithesis of good and evil, that of aesthetics the antithesis of the beautiful and ugly, and that of economics the antithesis of the profitable and unprofitable. In politics the specific distinction is that between *friend and enemy*. Schmitt's extremism consists in the reduction of politics to the condition of conflict, to the state of emergency, thus to the possibility of war if not war itself. The criterion of the political essentially determines the exceptional or extreme situation—it is the ground of the sovereign decision.

The connotations of the concept, enemy, may suggest an ideological predisposition to, or affinity for, Nazism. Schmitt characterized the enemy as the

other, the stranger, who in an intense way is alien, and thus in an extreme or threatening situation, conflict or war is possible (*Concept*, pp. 27 f.). This definition possibly brings to mind the enemy as any hated or supposedly threatening race or nation which justifiably may be exterminated. And, of course, in the view of Nazism the Jewish people became such an enemy. Thus, for some critics, anti-Semitism, or racism generally, is the logical consequence of Schmitt's theory.

Schmitt's reductionist conceptualization may contribute to extremist politics. But more to the point, Schmitt replaced "the pure theory of law" with "the pure theory of political power" which is constructed upon a formal definition and thus empty of content.

Schmitt's theory of politics is the result of a misplaced abstraction. Schmitt lucidly distinguishes the *political* enemy from any other kind of adversary, e.g., religious or economic (*Concept*, secs. 3 and 4). The political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly. "An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity" (sec. 3). Normally, the fighting collectivities are sovereign states.

Any nonpolitical social entity can become strong enough in a situation of conflict to qualify as a political entity, however (*Concept*, pp. 37 f.). At this point the friend/enemy antithesis pushes aside any other antithesis by which a *social entity* is determined. For any grouping which is constituted by the "most extreme possibility," of battle or war is "the decisive human grouping," "the political entity." Thus Schmitt's formulation covers not only conflict between states but also civil wars and revolutions which are the results of social groups powerful enough to challenge and oppose sovereign states and consequently to create political situations. For example, religious wars involve religious communities which have become political entities according to the criterion of friend/enemy and not simply groupings determined by the distinction of the chosen and the unchosen or the believers and the infidels. Likewise the class struggle in the Marxist sense is not simply an economic conflict but a battle between political entities. If the proletarian class succeeds in taking over the state, then it becomes the source of sovereignty. In conclusion, the friend/enemy antithesis covers a broader scope of politics than the concept of decisionism and supplies the ground for decisionism. The real issue is, What is the substantive *purpose* or *goal* of *political* conflict? It is clear that the enemy is *public*, not a private adversary. But what is the *substance* of concrete political reality of which the friend/enemy antithesis is a major component?

Schmitt prided himself on his attention to the concrete and existential meaning of political concepts (*Concept*, sec. 3). They are not symbols or psychological expressions of individualistic feelings and, finally, they do not refer to moralistic or spiritualistic antitheses. For Schmitt, liberalism is the political ideology that has been responsible for the confusion in political thought. On the one hand, liberalism has reduced the enemy to the competitor in the economic

domain, and on the other hand to the debating adversary in the domain of morals or intellect. Insofar as political concepts contain a polemical character, theoretically as well as politically, liberalism as the negation of politics is Schmitt's enemy (sec. 8). Schmitt considered liberalism as a consistent system of thought which has resulted in the project to depoliticize society by neutralizing the political character of the most controversial issues. There is the imperative to avoid conflict and war at all costs (although often without success), even at the expense of an honest acknowledgement of political reality. Notwithstanding the impact of liberalism on modern society, politics remains, if concealed. From this perspective liberalism reveals itself as the most deceptive form of politics.

After World War I Schmitt undertook a probing analysis of the crisis of parliamentary democracy in Europe.[4] The liberal democracies which emerged from the ruins of monarchy and empire exhibited the major disorders that Schmitt associated with the faith in rationalism, the denial of man's inherent wickedness, the opposition to sovereign authority, and the utopian appeal of pacifism and internationalism. Liberal parliaments sought to govern in terms of ideological formulas which masked the real conflicts that finally surfaced, and in many cases brutal dictatorships replaced parliamentary governments. The Bolshevik and Fascist revolutions seemed to confirm Schmitt's basic thesis. Although Schmitt originally opposed Nazism, he made his peace with it during the first three years of Hitler's rule.

Schmitt presented parliamentary government not as a worthwhile ideal but as the unfortunate coming together of two contradictory principles—liberalism and democracy. The view of politics as basically the debate and exchange of opinions in the parliament is the essence of liberalism. The final decision is delayed indefinitely as the different proposals are considered and discussed. The parliament, which ostensibly is elected by the people, does not represent the popular will but the constellation of interests that form the majority party or coalition of parties. In the end parliament is ruled by an elite supported by publicists and intellectuals. Government is a debating society that rules by attempting to manipulate the opinion of the public in the name of rationality. The publicity of parliamentary discussion in search of the "rational" policy is only a facade for the cabals of the party leaders.

Democracy is grounded on a different principle. Schmitt viewed democracy in its radical form as the result of the formation of a popular will or general will. Unlike liberalism, democracy is shaped by definitive decisions of the government in order to satisfy the needs and desires of the people, to reinforce the social and moral bonds, and to advance the conditions of equality. Hence, in extreme situations, when legal norms fail, dictatorship is identified with democracy, for the popular will may be determined by acclamation rather than by votes. On this basis Schmitt compared Bolshevism and Fascism with the Jacobinism of the French Revolution. The crisis of modern democracy has been the

tension between liberalism and democracy, and the failure of this system has led to totalitarian dictatorship.

Schmitt was among the very first to point to the unique phenomenon of *totalitarianism* (*Concept*, sec. 1). Inasmuch as politics is rooted in human nature, the reaction to the liberal negation of politics unleashes with a vengeance the affirmation of politics.

Schmitt considered that in the eighteenth century and in some instances through the nineteenth into the twentieth, the right relationship was established between the political and the nonpolitical, between the state and the other areas of human activity. Society was not antithetical to the state, and the state assumed the status above society as the source of order—a relationship developed philosophically by Hegel. Culture, religion and the economy developed as distinctive spheres independently of the state, but the state could still intervene to preserve the political order. Any area of life could acquire political significance under specific, concrete situations. But beginning in the nineteenth century liberalism became increasingly the enemy of the political, of the state, as the instrument of repression. As a result the distinction of the state and society led to the depoliticization and neutralization of significant areas of life, particularly the economy, and the enlargement of the rights of the individual. Liberalism thus has moved between the two poles of ethics and economics (*Concept*, pp. 71 f.). From the pole of ethics, the freedom of the individual becomes the supreme principle—the state must supply the conditions for, and eliminate the infringements on, freedom. The liberal enemy is the opponent in a discussion. From the pole of economics, the role of producer or consumer, of employer or worker, attains greater significance than that of citizen or subject of the state. The economy apparently replaces the state as the ordering principle of society. The enemy is thus the competitor for economic power. Morally, the self-sacrifice of the individual in defense of the state is depreciated in favor of a radical individualism, the assertion of rights in opposition to the state. For Schmitt, the life-and-death struggle with the enemy determines the very essence of politics.

In the twentieth century, the democratic element in liberal society has asserted itself and demanded a greater role for the state. But the state is not regarded as the authority that stands above society. Schmitt understood democracy as essentially the *identity* of state and society, of the government and the governed. Social matters have become political as affairs of state have become social. State and society interpenetrate one another. Consequently, the radical development of the tendency to politicize the formerly neutral domains of society has resulted in the *total* state. Society constitutes the state which embraces all facets of life. Any and every opponent or adversary may become the enemy. Thus, for Schmitt, totalitarianism arises out of the instability and inadequacy of liberal democracy—the depoliticization of society is followed by the total politicization of life. Of course, the defeat of Nazism in war and the internal collapse of Bolshevism have removed the worst totalitarian systems. The di-

lemmas and issues indicated by Schmitt continue to plague liberal democracy, however. In the modern welfare state the laws support radical individualism in the moral-social sphere, while in many areas a vast array of bureaucratic institutions and programs foster a form of collectivism in the name of equality. In addition, many in the middle and working classes have become disenchanted with liberal policies that challenge traditional virtues and beliefs and thus lack a moral consensus. As a result, liberal elites in the United States bypass the political process, and thus the general electorate, and appeal to the judicial system for support of their policies—controversial political issues are presented as matters of constitutionality that are immune to the judgment of the majority.

Schmitt further revealed what is perhaps the most insidious outcome of the denial of the friend/enemy antithesis and thus of the political—the appeal to some nebulous universalism that opposes the legitimate division of peoples and nations into limited political entities (*Concept*, pp. 53–57). In this regard he anticipated the political teaching of Alexandre Kojève—the proclamation of the end of history, which is the end of politics, i.e., the establishment of the universal and homogeneous state.[5]

According to Schmitt the two poles of liberal ideology—ethics and economics—both point to a universal society without politics. From the ethical side, liberalism conceives of the individual as essentially part of humanity, which, of course, is true. But for liberalism the individual is devoid of any specific social or political identity and thereby any obligations. The concept of humanity in former times basically supplied the criterion for man's highest fulfillment (such as natural law) and thus the basis for the judgment of polities and civilization and for the formation of the character of the individual. Such a view acknowledged the existence of a diversity of societies and cultures as a permanent reality given the limits of human nature—the need for specific attachments. In short, man must be satisfied with the possibility that the universal goals of human aspiration are in part fulfilled in particular societies at particular times. By contrast liberalism conceives of humanity as potentially a concrete entity the development of which is obstructed by irrational attachments to outmoded traditions and beliefs and the lack of good faith fostered by political dissensions and conflicts. To many liberals the United Nations is the first step in the full realization of universal humanity.

From the economic side, liberals point to the fact that modern nations have been brought closer together as a result of involvement in international markets for exchanging industrial products and natural resources in order to satisfy the needs of people, and of the sharing in the benefits of technological developments which transcend national boundaries and overcome political differences. One could say that even nuclear power, which created the fear of worldwide annihilation, has further contributed to the unification of mankind as a social entity, especially after the Cold War. Humanitarianism and trade—ethics and economics—are joined in the destruction of politics.

Schmitt speculated in 1932 that if such a world came into being, the reality

of the enemy would disappear as mankind would become an association of producers and consumers. The bureaucratic structures required to operate this worldwide technological-economic system would bring forth an awesome power to control and direct it, however. Such a power would be greater than any state in the ordinary sense of the word.

Schmitt pointed to the totalitarian implications of the liberal appeal to universal humanity. The struggle to achieve the universal order involves political activity and thus the designation of the enemy.

In the interim liberal foreign policy utilizes economics as the weapon—boycotts, sanctions, and war reparations, which could harm civilians more than war itself. For Schmitt this represents a kind of moral hypocrisy (*Concept*, pp. 78–79). Strictly, no human could be an enemy of humanity. Consequently, the enemy must be nonhuman or subhuman. The war to end all wars, the war to establish a world without enemies, must reduce the concrete enemy to the level of the subhuman. It is not sufficient to defeat or weaken the enemy, he must be annihilated in the name of humanity. In order to actualize the radical implications of universalism, totalitarian ideologies have *politicized* the liberal idea of humanity. For example, if humanity is identified with the proletariat, then the bourgeoisie is not only the enemy but is either demonized or dehumanized. This explains the extreme cruelty of Communist dictatorship.[6]

For Schmitt the concept of the political enemy is self-limiting. Finite political entities fight concrete enemies for specific reasons. War in this context does not require the extreme policy of general annihilation or destruction. The ideological wars of the present, like religious wars of the past, have obscured the political understanding of the enemy and its human dimensions.

While Schmitt did not fully develop the philosophical implications of the political concept of the enemy, he definitely was striving for a comprehensive theory of politics—perhaps unintentionally for the restoration of political philosophy. Notwithstanding his devastating critique of liberalism and his original and perceptive insights into concrete political reality, Schmitt's work is constricted by his methodology and formalism. He did not define politics in terms of a distinctive goal. Any human activity may become the substance of politics—the subject of the friend/enemy antithesis, which is an empty formula.

To substantiate this criticism one must turn to Schmitt's truly philosophic critic, Leo Strauss. Strauss, in his famous commentary on *The Concept of the Political* (pp. 81–105), offered a penetrating insight into the major limitations of Schmitt's thought. Years later he maintained that this critique corresponded to a change of orientation in his thinking.[7] Whereas he originally thought that a return to premodern philosophy is impossible, he came to the conclusion that the self-destruction of reason was the consequence of modern rationalism, and that it was both necessary and possible to return to the premodern rationalism—Jewish-medieval rationalism and its foundation in the classical philosophy of Plato and Aristotle.

Already Strauss, as a young Jew, saw the need to face "the theolog-

ico-political predicament" in the unstable democracy of post–World War I Germany.

In general the political situation has always been most acute for Jews and especially for Judaism in Christian Europe. According to tradition the Pentateuch is the Law of God revealed to the Jews through Moses. The covenant established not only a community of believers but a civil order. Hence the Jews have formed a distinct community in Christian nations. A particular Christian society is composed of believers in the universal faith of human salvation as revealed by God through Jesus, God's son who announced the fulfillment of the Old Law. The faithful are governed by a particular state and comprise a spiritual community, the church, which is separate from, but morally higher than, the state. But the state had to supply the conditions for religion. Only with the advancement of the secularization of the state (a basically liberal objective) did the Jews acquire full citizenship, which presented dilemmas for Jews and Christians alike. Religious Jews have remained aware of their distinctiveness, their estrangement even in a liberalized Christian society. Likewise, traditional Christians have not accepted fully the political or civil neutralization of Christianity in modern society. Even liberal Jews and liberal Christians remain distinct in their view of liberalism—nonreligious Jews are still Jews from an ethnic standpoint. Liberal society has not completely abolished the differences between Jew and non-Jew. The rise of Nazism out of the failures of liberal democracy confirmed this truth. For this reason, Strauss rejected the teaching of Spinoza, the philosophic source of liberal Judaism and, along with Hobbes, of the liberal ideology in general.

While he was committed to Zionism, Strauss concluded that the state of Israel cannot resolve the dilemma for the modern Jew. Zionism is a secular idea, but because of the Jewish tradition Israel cannot be like other nations.

Strauss maintained that the theologico-political problem exhibits the essence of politics itself—politics has its roots in the sacred, in what is commonly known as religion. Strauss's reconsideration of classical philosophy, as essential to the revival of rationalism in a troubled age, led to the realization that classical political philosophy grew out of the confrontation of the philosophic life with the life of political virtue sanctioned by the gods of the polity, or by piety. According to the classics, the highest life is that devoted to the pursuit of wisdom, the love of wisdom, or philosophy. Knowledge is attained through the unassisted exercise of reason. For the nonphilosophic citizens, the good life is that devoted to the exercise of the moral virtues in fulfillment of the laws of the conventional order, the realm of the sacred supervised by the gods. The political order offers the context for the philosophical inquiry into what is most needful—the nature of the good life and thus the questioning of the traditional gods by appealing to the order of nature. Such questioning created the tension between philosophy and politics which led to the execution of Socrates and to the development of political philosophy by his successors, Plato and Aristotle.

The standard of political right had to be based on reason, not simply on arbitrary conventions—based on nature or what conforms to the fulfillment of the human soul, of man as both a rational and political being. Such an inquiry discerned the model of the best regime, the rule of wisdom, as the measure of politics. And thus the doctrine of *natural right* was established.[8]

For Strauss the introduction of classical thought into Judaism raised similar difficulties—but with a fundamental difference. The Jewish community was constituted by the Pentateuch, or Torah, the law *revealed* by the Creator-God. Revelation challenged the view that unassisted reason could arrive at the highest wisdom. God created the world; the order of nature is not a self-subsistent reality that can be fully known by reason alone. Thus the highest wisdom requires submission to the inscrutable will of the Creator, who reveals the truth according to his discretion. The Law of God prescribes fully what must be known in order to gain salvation. All truths both practical and speculative are encompassed by it. Revelation offered the greatest challenge to reason. In response the Jewish followers of the classical philosophers followed an esoteric method of interpreting Scriptures, so that they could give philosophic support to the Law and preserve the freedom of philosophical speculation. Philosophy was justified in terms of the Law, so that political philosophy became associated with prophecy.

Strauss demonstrated that the theologico-political problem required an examination of the distinction between classical and modern rationalism and the tension between philosophy and politics—ultimately between philosophy and religion.

The real core of the problem is the tension between reason and revelation as the fundamental sources of Western thought and thus of political aspiration. Ironically, in his appeal to classical philosophy and natural law, Strauss is closer to a part of the Catholic tradition, that of Aquinas, than is Schmitt. Strauss offered an alternative conception of the theologico-political problem to that of Schmitt, who adopted Christian theology as a model for the development of his concept of decisionism. Strauss specifically endeavored to restore classical political philosophy, which could alone make sense of the theologico-political problem from the side of reason, however. By contrast, Schmitt characterized political truth as what is disclosed by the extreme situation. It is as if the extreme situation is an instance of revelation. He presented his political theology with the admixture of the political philosophy of Hobbes and the methodology of sociology.[9] Strauss's commentary suggests the beginnings of his own distinctive thought of later years.

In contrasting Schmitt with Hobbes (his favorite philosopher) as to their opposing views of the relation of the individual to society, Strauss put in bold relief the real theoretical issue presented by modern liberalism (*Concept*, pp. 94 f.). For the friend/enemy antithesis presupposes the intense association of friends and the intense dissociation of enemies. The possibility of self-sacrifice

is essential to the defense of the state. For Hobbes, however, the right of self-preservation is the ground of civil society as it is of the state of nature—no collectivity can demand the relinquishment of that right. Peace is most desirable for the security of the right to self-preservation which is the ultimate goal. Whereas Schmitt's affirmation of the political and thus of conflict justifies the sacrifice of the individual for the defense of society, the Hobbesian and liberal negation of the political in favor of peace supports a radical individualism. Schmitt's polemical attack on liberalism is not so much a glorification of war as an unmasking of the true character of the human condition, which is obscured by the comforts and security of the peaceful status quo.

For Strauss, by affirming the political Schmitt wished to demonstrate the seriousness of life and the foundation of morality. For without politics everything else becomes entertainment. It would appear that Schmitt's moral imperative is inseparable from the affirmation of the political—of the dangerous human condition that Hobbes wished to overcome. According to Strauss, however, Schmitt abstracted politics from morality because he still remained under the spell of liberalism—he conceived of no other morality but that of liberal humanitarianism. Schmitt's affirmation of the political was really nothing other than "liberalism preceded by a minus-sign" (*Concept*, p. 102).

Unlike his acceptance of the theological concept of moral depravity in his earlier writings, in *The Concept of the Political* Schmitt specifically adopted the morally neutral concept of man's *dangerous* nature as developed in the thought of Hobbes. Further, Schmitt suggested that the pessimistic presupposition of human nature in political thought is a methodological determination (*Concept*, pp. 64 f.). Thus the question arises whether Schmitt did not undermine his original substantive anthropology.

In the end, Schmitt did not totally transcend the conceptual limits of liberalism. Schmitt's critique of liberalism was determined by the presuppositions of Hobbes, who founded liberalism. Strauss transcended the limits of the liberal tradition by appealing to classical political philosophy, to the teaching of natural right. His interpretation of Aristotle's conception of natural right implicitly presented a criticism of Schmitt's decisionism as well as liberal humanitarianism (*Natural Right and History*, pp. 159–61).

According to Strauss, Aristotelian natural right consists of concrete decisions rather than general propositions, in contradistinction to Thomistic natural law. "In every human conflict there exists the possibility of a just decision based on full consideration of all circumstances." While in normal situations *the common good* of society demands compliance with the general rules of justice, in extreme situations "the public safety is the highest law" which permits deviations from ordinary principles of justice. Thus natural right must be mutable in order to cope with the wicked inventiveness of dangerous enemies. The discrimination between a normal situation and an extreme situation must ultimately depend on the prudential judgment of the statesman, not on general

prescriptions for action decided in advance. Natural right rests on "a universally valid hierarchy of ends," not on "universally valid rules of action." This doctrine satisfies both the "realism" of Schmitt and the "idealism" of those who view politics as the realization of moral virtue.

In light of the foregoing, I think it is appropriate to discuss briefly Strauss's differences with Schmitt regarding the positive aspects of modern liberal democracy.

Strauss referred to the doctrine of the Declaration of Independence in his denunciation of the moral relativism and hence nihilism of modern liberalism (*Natural Right and History*, "Introduction"). While the Founders of the American regime were inspired by a modification of the modern principle of natural right, the teaching of inalienable rights endowed by the Creator harkened back to the double tradition of classical natural right and Biblical revelation. The end of the Declaration refers to sacred honor. There is not only the right to self-preservation but the duty to form a government which preserves freedom—the condition for the fulfillment of man's highest aims. Contrary to this tradition, the radical individuality of modern liberalism does not discriminate between true freedom and license.

Because of the classical element in democracy, Strauss praised the virtues of the great democratic statesmen such as Lincoln and Churchill who contributed to the preservation of freedom and justice in the face of extreme situations. Thus, modern democracy may engender those concrete decisions which compose natural right.

To be fair to Schmitt, it is necessary to consider his own qualified defense of the American constitutional order (*The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, p. 45). The conception of the separation of powers, which designates the legislative power as characterized by rational discussion and the executive power as the source of unity of decision, embodies a moderate liberalism which reflects the influence of deism. For Schmitt the presidential system of democracy is preferable to the parliamentary system, for it gives the executive the authority of decisive action in times of emergency. In light of this conception of democracy, Schmitt suggested reforms to strengthen the presidential office in the Weimar Republic.

In conclusion, Strauss's reconsideration of natural right began as a study of the philosophy of Hobbes, who was the founder of the modern doctrine of natural right—the claim of the individual to the right of self-preservation. This doctrine takes its bearings from the extreme situation of a prepolitical state of nature which engenders the fear of violent death as the root of the creation of society. While Schmitt agreed with Hobbes in rejecting the premodern view of natural right or of natural law,[10] and in deriving the truth of politics from the extreme situation, he did not subscribe to the Hobbesian conception of natural right. Strauss sought to overcome the deficiencies of Schmitt by recovering the classical teaching as the alternative to that of Hobbes.

NOTES

1. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), p. 5.

2. The fact that the Christian concept of Providence is not specifically political may explain Schmitt's ambiguity. Schmitt did not show how sovereignty is limited by any transcendent principle. Perhaps as a believing Catholic he subscribed to the general teachings of the Catholic Church as to the limits of the state. But he did reject the doctrine of natural law (see *The Concept of the Political*, p. 67). Possibly he thought that God's direct intervention imposes limits on the state, and such an occurrence is not comprehensible by reason but only by faith. See Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss und Der Begriff des Politischen* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuch-handlung, 1988).

3. *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1976).

4. *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

5. Alexandre Kojève, "Tyranny and Wisdom," in Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny* (New York: Free Press, 1963), pp. 43–88. Kojève drew a parallel between the realization of the universal state as the fulfillment of man's historical struggle for mutual recognition of the innate dignity of all and the completion of the philosophical pursuit of wisdom—the end of politics and the end of philosophy.

In his critique of Kojève, Strauss follows Schmitt in affirming politics, but specifically for the sake of defending freedom and what is intrinsically human, which is ultimately the philosophical life. The end of politics would be the end of philosophy ("Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*," pp. 189–226).

6. Harry Neumann, *Liberalism* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1991), pp. 138–48. Neumann claims that liberalism denies any moral truth and thus undermines the very foundation of politics. Liberalism creates nihilism, an emptiness, that is filled by fanatical politics—hence the development of totalitarianism. The "politicized" liberal is susceptible to the ideologies of Hitler and Stalin.

7. "Preface," *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. E.M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), pp. 1–31. This study on Spinoza is an early work (1930) to which Strauss attached his intellectual autobiography, which outlines the development of his thought and its roots in the "theologico-political predicament." He also reassessed his views of Spinoza.

8. *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), chaps. 3 and 4.

9. Ibid., chap. 2, especially pp. 74 f. Weber's doctrine of the distinction between facts and values is compared to the tension between reason and revelation. Weber claims that reason can determine the true relationships of facts or phenomena, which comprise science, but there cannot be a science of values. The choice of one value over another is not dependent on reason but on will. The good is not an object of knowledge but only of belief.

For Strauss, Weber's view of the noncognitive status of values called into question even the value of science—of the pursuit of knowledge. All values took on the aura of religious beliefs. This is comparable to the fact that philosophy as unassisted reason cannot refute the claims of revelation. It would appear that perhaps philosophy rests on faith, which would confirm the need for revelation from some greater mind than that of man—from God. Schmitt's use of social science in explicating his political theology may thus not be so strange after all.

10. *The Concept of the Political*, p. 67. Here Schmitt appealed to Hobbes in outlining the usual positivistic argument against natural law, or higher law: law implies some authority to enforce it. There is a Christian tradition that would claim that the higher law is the law of God, partly communicated by the teachings of the Church and ultimately by acts of Providence—law not dependent on human reason or prudence.

For Neumann (*Liberalism*, p. 93), Schmitt's Christian faith ultimately shares with liberalism a bias against politics, because he cannot affirm politics as a positive good but as a necessity for controlling evil, which may explain the rejection of traditional natural law. Politics discloses the dangerous condition of human life. Also Christianity appeals to the universal order of faith, not the specific regime of a political society.